

JOHN HAGGERTY

Tumbleweeds

Atkins called them tumbleweeds. He said that's what they reminded him of, the way we always found them curled up against the fence. I think maybe he had just seen too many Westerns, because they looked nothing like that to me. Then again, I tried not to look at them at all. I'd had enough by then, enough of the heat and the cold, enough of the boredom and the terror, and, most of all, enough of the desperate and the dying and the dead.

It was down to just me and Atkins by the time the tumbleweeds started showing up. Our camp was an artillery spotters' post originally, but the war moved north and made it obsolete. Still, it was in a great position, our little encampment. It sat on a hill in the middle of a broad valley, with unobstructed views all around, and the Army just couldn't give it up. So they left the two of us there to watch it, and then they forgot about us completely. The mission — if you can call it that — was to monitor refugee movement, look for Chinese infiltrators, generally make ourselves useful. Once a week we were supposed to call in our observations, numbers of parties, direction of travel, that sort of thing. And that's what we did for a while. It drove Atkins nuts. He wanted to be up there with the excitement: the noise, the rage, the fear, the blood. I had gotten my fill of that, and, at first, the base suited me just fine, those long days watching the valley or staring up into the sky — it was enough for me. Every once in a while we would see some pathetic group of starving civilians heading south, but most of the time, we were alone. When the Chinese retreated they had stripped the valley of everything useful and burned the

rest, so, on those late autumn days, before the last winter of the Korean War, it was like looking out at a valley on the moon, shades of gray and brown, desolation and emptiness, the silence and loneliness of the vacuum of space.

Around the first snow, we lost radio contact. I went to make our weekly call and got nothing. No response, no bored voice on the other end, just the thin crackle of cosmic rays and sunspots — impersonal, indifferent, and cold.

I called Atkins into the radio tent. “We’ve got no contact,” I told him. Atkins was ostensibly the CO, mostly on the basis of a few months of seniority and the ability to give a crap. He was a big, beefy man, the all-American type, the kind of guy we export to impress the natives. He had a wide, open face that should have been friendly, but the months of solitude hadn’t been easy on him, and now he looked out at the world through a stone mask, a combination of anger and contempt.

“Jesus, Dunne, you are one hell of a fuckup,” he said. I think he liked to talk that way because it reminded him of basic training, which seemed to be a revelatory period in his life. To hear him talk it was as though he had sprung fully grown into the world on intake day, sort of a reverse Samson, granted supernatural strength when they shaved the hair off his head. “Did you check the frequency?”

“Who would have changed the frequency? We never talk to anyone else.”

Atkins looked at his watch and examined the radio. He grabbed the mic out of my hand and started giving our call sign.

“I’ve been doing that for ten minutes,” I told him. “There’s nobody there.”

“Shut up, Dunne. I’m listening.”

I got up and left the tent. There was a cold wind blowing down from the northwest. It smelled like snow, but the sky above was blue and clear and empty. Atkins joined me with a tight smile.

“Just a typical Army snafu,” he said. “They’ll be back up next week.”

But they weren’t back the next week. Or the week after. I thought we should try some different frequencies, find someone, anyone to talk to, but Atkins wouldn’t hear of it. It would be an actionable breach of regulations, he said, and it wouldn’t happen on his watch. I would just shrug and go to check on our supplies. I had started doing this obsessively when our radio contact disappeared. We had a reasonable amount of food and fuel, but there was no telling anymore when we would get a resupply. I vowed right then to leave Atkins to starve by himself when the food ran out. I would take our truck and head south and leave him to his noble death, the last man standing in our useless outpost.

Winter fell onto us like a cold, suffocating weight. I woke up one morning to see high, feathery cirrus clouds blowing fast across the sky. By noon the next day,

the empty, blue skies of autumn had been replaced by a leaden gray. That night it started snowing, covering the valley with a deadening blanket of white. Then the cold came and it was like some kind of monster, crawling into your lungs, settling in your bones. We huddled around our kerosene heater, and the stink of it permeated everything. There was kerosene in the food, in the water. The world filled up with that sour chemical taste.

That winter was a bad one. It would have been hard without the war, but the combination of cold and combat was disastrous. At first, we would see little bands of travelers, but as the grim weather kept on, we saw fewer and fewer people. Temperatures had been below freezing for two straight weeks when we found the first tumbleweed. There had been a refugee party passing to the east a day earlier, and I guess he had been with them. I called Atkins over when I found him. An old guy in shabby cotton clothes, curled up, frozen and stiff. I found myself getting angry at him — this pathetic, frozen, gray little man. What right did he have to come and die up against our fence? Why did he pick us, when there were so many other places in this terrible country he could have done it? Death was everywhere. Death was the air we breathed and the water we drank. Why did we have to have one more reminder?

Atkins, predictably, was incensed.

“Jesus Christ,” he said when he saw it. “Tell me, Dunne, how the fuck someone can creep up to our wire undetected? He could have been a Chinese sapper. He could have cut the wire and killed us both.”

It had been my watch, but I had long since ceased to take most of my duties seriously. When I pulled the night watch, I would take my stinking sleeping bag and lie down in the cab of the truck, shivering and praying for that first gray light of dawn. “Come on, Atkins,” I said. “Look at him. He’s just some frozen civilian. He crawled up here to die.”

“You should have detected him. You should have challenged him.”

“Who cares?” I said. “We lived through the attack. The enemy has been repulsed. And what are we supposed to do with him now?”

That one shut him up. The ground was frozen solid. You could break fingers trying to get a pick or a shovel into it. “How about if we burn him?” I asked. “We could pour kerosene on him and cremate him.” But even as I said it, I knew that it wasn’t a possibility. We didn’t have any kerosene to spare, and the notion of the body cooking outside the fence line sickened me. In the end we just moved it down the hill a bit and covered it with a tarp, but neither of us felt really comfortable with

it, and when the wind would start up, we could hear the canvas flap, and it gave us both the creeps.

In the next few weeks, we got four more. I don't know why they chose our hill to die. Most likely they just washed up against our fence line, like driftwood on a beach, but it was on my mind a lot, thinking of them crawling through the night, up toward the lights and barbed wire of our camp. And as the pile of bodies under the tarp got bigger, we both got more and more on edge. They were always at the back of my mind, those corpses outside the wire, and one day I woke up knowing that I had to do something.

"Atkins," I said over the deadening breakfast of kerosene and eggs. "We have to deal with the tumbleweeds. They're driving me crazy."

"Yeah, like what? We've been over this. We can't bury them. We can't burn them. So what's left?"

"I've got it figured out," I said. "Look." I took out one of our maps. "There's an old coal mine on this ridge here, twelve and a half miles north. There must be some open mine shafts or something up there we can throw them into."

"We can't leave the base," Atkins said. "We can't abandon our post."

"Nobody gives a shit about our post," I said. He looked up and away from me, as if he were looking for support from someone, some commander somewhere to tell him what to do. "I'm sick of those bodies down there," I continued. "I know you are too. It's not far. We can be out and back in four or five hours."

"You go then," Atkins said. "I'll stay here."

"No," I said, surprised at the strength of my feeling. "I need your help." I was horrified at the idea of being alone with the corpses. I needed the solid presence of Atkins to insulate me against them.

He still wouldn't look at me, but I could sense that he was losing his will. He wanted the bodies gone too. "Half a day," I said. "Half a day and then we'll be done with them. We'll be back before anyone knows."

"OK," he finally said. "But we make sure the valley is completely clean before we go. No civilians, no nothing, or we stay."

We spent the next day staring out at the blinding white of the valley. It was dead and still, alien and completely hostile to life. The day after that, without even speaking, we drove the truck down to the tumbleweeds and got to work. It was a grim business, putting them in the back of the truck. Each one was frozen solid, stiff and unyielding. I tried not to look at them. I wanted no part of them, but as we picked them up one by one and swung them into the back of the truck, I couldn't help but make an inventory. Three male, two female, all old except for one young

woman. They were emaciated, their clothing thin and torn. I tried not to look at the faces as I cinched the tarp over the back of the truck and got in the cab.

It was cold, as always, and overcast. There was something about the day I didn't like, a mean, indifferent edge to it that made me, more than ever, want to be done with the whole horrible affair.

"Half a day, right?" Atkins asked, starting the truck.

"Half a day."

"Something's coming in. We don't want to be out there too long."

"Half a day," I repeated, and he put the truck in gear and we were moving.

But I was wrong. It took a lot longer than half a day. The roads, for one thing, were terrible. Unused all winter and never really great to begin with, they were almost impossible to follow. Sometimes they would disappear under drifts of snow. Sometimes they would just seem to peter out, dead end at a gully or a washout, forcing us to backtrack and look for another way. The wind picked up and we were periodically forced to slow to a crawl, trying to feel our way through great billows of blowing snow. The temperature dropped steadily and dark, heavy clouds set in, turning the world into a dim, gray bowl. Atkins had begun muttering under his breath, a low stream of curses, as he stared out into the growing storm. Looking back on it now, I don't know why we didn't just dump the bodies out of the truck and go home. But somehow the idea of getting to the mine, throwing the tumbleweeds in a hole, hiding them away forever, had grabbed both of us, and that was all we wanted to do anymore.

Atkins saw him first, of course. "What the fuck is that?" he asked, pointing a finger out at the bleary day. I squinted, trying to see into the thick, shifting dimness. Then I saw him too, the figure of a man moving through the swirling clouds of snow.

"Shit," Atkins said. "Shit, shit, shit. Where the fuck did he come from? This valley is supposed to be empty. How could you miss him?"

"It's nothing, Atkins. Just another refugee. He must have been holed up somewhere yesterday."

Atkins stopped the truck and the man shuffled toward us. He was old, like most of our tumbleweeds, and dressed in tattered, black cotton. His skin was gray with the cold.

"We have to question him," Atkins said, getting out of the truck.

"What are you talking about?" I yelled at him as I followed. "He probably doesn't speak English. It's getting late. We don't have time. He'll be dead in a day anyway. Let's go, Atkins."

"We didn't see him come into the valley. He could be an infiltrator."

"He's a tumbleweed, Atkins," I shouted. I so desperately wanted to be done with our insane errand. I wanted no part of another old, dying man, another piece of responsibility, another anonymous tragedy to witness. But Atkins had already grabbed the man by the arm and was vigorously searching him for weapons.

"We'll take him with us," he said. "We can question him on the way." He shoved the man into the cab of the truck and gunned the engine until I got in with them. We sat in silence for a few moments as the truck got moving again.

"Warm." It was the old man. Both Atkins and I stared at him in surprise.

"Warm," he repeated again, and he smiled at both of us.

"You speak English?" I asked slowly.

"Yes," the old man said. He was small and bald, shivering with cold. He had stuffed straw into his clothing as insulation. He looked like a tiny scarecrow. "I am monk," he said. "After war, abbot say, 'Everyone learn English. English very important language.'"

"See?" Atkins said. "Good thing we stopped him. He knows English. Don't you think that's suspicious?"

"He's a monk. If he was a spy, would he tell us he knows English?"

"What are you doing in this valley?" Atkins asked sharply.

"The Chinese, they shell our monastery. Many killed. No place to stay, too much fighting. Very sad. I start walking south. I walk for very long time."

"See?" I said. "He's a refugee."

"We've been watching the whole valley. How did you get in here without us seeing you?" Atkins asked.

The old man shrugged. "Valley is big. I am small."

Atkins drove in silence for a while. Finally, the old man said, "Big storm coming. You should go home."

"We have a job to do," I said.

"What job?" he asked.

I felt suddenly uncomfortable. "Bodies," I mumbled. "We need to bury some bodies."

The old man looked sad. "So much killing. Soldier friends?"

"No," I said. "Refugees. Frozen. In the back of the truck." I motioned vaguely backward.

The old man was silent and then said, "Korean? Korean bodies?"

"Yeah," I said.

He sat up a little bit. "I am priest. I do funeral."

“Jesus Christ,” Atkins said. “Just what we need.” He motioned out at the gloomy day. “Look, we don’t have time for a funeral. We have to get back.”

“Very quick,” the old man said. “One minute. Everyone needs funeral.”

And, suddenly, I desperately wanted that for the tumbleweeds. One last gesture, no matter how small. Some tiny acknowledgment, a farewell touch before the long loneliness of death.

“Let’s let him do it,” I said. “It’s the least we can do.”

“Jesus Christ, Dunne,” Atkins started, but I interrupted him.

“A minute, Atkins,” I said. “Just one minute.” And there must have been something in my voice, because Atkins looked at me and then looked away.

“A minute,” he said. “That’s it.”

By the time we got to the mine, it was late in the afternoon. The feeble daylight was lowering into an ominous blackness. A few flakes of snow drifted down through the lights of the truck. There wasn’t much left of the mine — a few heaps of rubble here and there, some yawning dark holes in the ground. Everything else had been stripped away. The light dimmed around us like a dying man’s sight. Atkins found an open shaft, and I unloaded the bodies. Conscious of the presence of the monk, I tried to place them on the ground with some level of respect. They felt light in my hands, like China Dolls, and I laid them down in a neat row. They were so sad, lined up like that, like some museum exhibit of futility and despair.

The monk went from body to body, bowing before each one and then chanting in a rapid monotone. It was completely foreign to me, but I was touched by his concern for these people who were well past requiring his care. When the monk finished with each of the bodies, Atkins and I would pick it up and carry it over to the mine shaft. We would swing the body — one, two, three — and then fling it into the hole. I found myself wincing at each one, anticipating the crunching thud of impact at the bottom. In the end, though, even at that deserted mine, in the dreary, dying light, I felt better somehow, as if, for the first time in that godforsaken place, I had done something good.

Atkins got into the truck and started it up. He rolled the window down. “Get in, Dunne,” he said. “Tell the old guy thanks.”

“He’s coming with us,” I said. “We have to take him back to the base.”

“No, he’s not,” Atkins said. “Look, we’re running short of food. We don’t know when we’re going to get a resupply. He was wandering around out here before we found him, and he’ll be wandering around after we leave. You said it yourself. He’s a tumbleweed.”

“He’ll die out here,” I said. “We have to take him.”

"Get in the fucking truck, Dunne," Atkins said. "Get in the truck. That's an order."

"Atkins, this is insane. There is no base. There is no mission. Nobody cares. It's just us. Let's take the truck and drive south. There's nothing for us here." Suddenly, it was critically important to me not to be the passive witness to yet another death, to take something from this horrible war that I could be proud of. I grabbed the monk by the arm and hustled him over to the truck. But as I opened the door, I saw that Atkins had drawn his .45 and was pointing it at us.

"The monk stays here," he said tightly, and his face was mottled white and red. "We are going back and we are going to finish what we started. Or I will kill you both, I swear to God."

"Atkins, Jesus Christ," I started, but the monk interrupted me.

"I will stay," he said, moving away from the truck.

I turned to him. Night was on us now, and the snow had begun to fall steadily. "You'll freeze to death out here tonight," I said.

The monk motioned to the truck. "Your friend is afraid," he said. "You comfort him."

"But what about you?" I asked. "I can't leave you here."

The old man gazed at me. "I am old," he said. "We all die someday. Maybe I live. If I live until tomorrow, maybe tomorrow warmer. If I live until next day, maybe spring will come."

His eyes were steady and tremendously calm. Then he smiled. He raised his hands with his palms up. They were so cold that the snow that fell on them in clumps stayed unmelting, like tiny clusters of white flowers. "Until then," he said, "every snowflake falls in right place."

"At least take this." I took off my coat and handed it to him. He put it on, ludicrously dwarfed by its size. He smiled.

"Warm," he said.

He turned and shuffled off into the night, and I let him go. For years I was deeply ashamed of this, the weakness revealed, my fundamental lack of courage. But I have also learned that this is often what is left to us: small, seemingly impotent gestures, a coat passed from hand to hand, a few words before parting. It seems like so little. Nothing, really. But in the end it's all we have; it is what keeps us moving, like tumbleweeds, toward the lights and the barbed wire.

I stood still, looking out into the night. The wind picked up, blowing around and then through me, across the barren valley, over the hills, the mountains and the cold, black ocean, moving toward home. I walked over to the truck and opened the door. "Move over," I said to Atkins. "I'm driving." And he did. After a moment's

hesitation he slid right to make room for me. I got into the cab and looked into the darkness one last time, the snow in the headlights like falling stars.

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